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First Easter, as Depicted in Art—Great Masters Inspired. Stories of the Painters, and Mysteries Surrounding Them



"THE RESURRECTION"—PERUGINO.

BY JOHN ELPRETH WATKINS.

To the great Easter pictures of the masters one turns with relief after having contemplated the famous canvases depicting the revolting scenes, the tragedies, the terrors and the agonies which befell between the last supper and the entombment of Jesus—painful events which orthodox Christians have commemorated throughout the past fortnight, Passion Week and Holy Week.

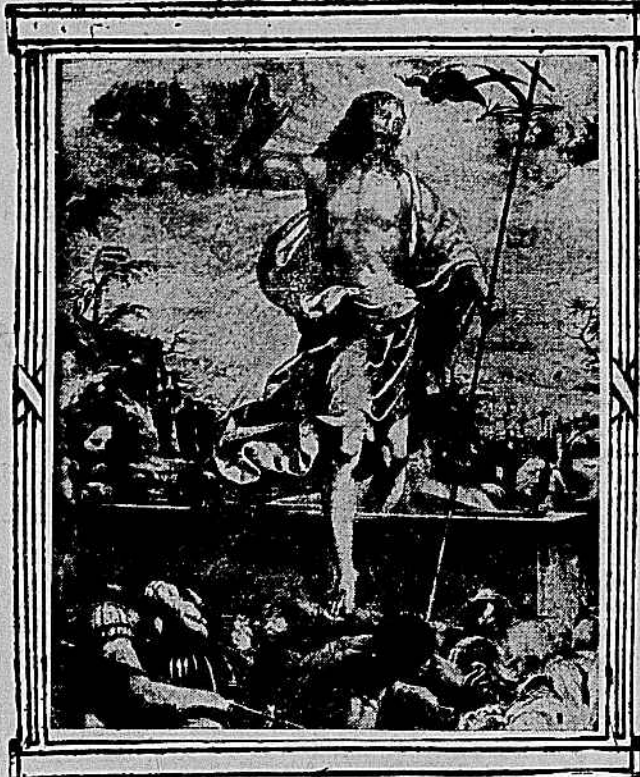
To pass from these themes to those of the resurrection and directly following is to close one's eyes upon horrors enacted under lowering skies and awaken upon the dawn of a radiant springtime morning of sublime amaze and rejoicings.

The miraculous event which Easter commemorates was long avoided by artists as too tremendous or too sacred, those who first dared the theme executed it with realism, depicting the resurrected Christ as actually stepping out of the tomb or standing upon it, and as always bearing in His hand the "resurrection flag," with its red cross upon a white ground, a banner emblematic of victory over the grave. The extent of the scriptural data which these painters had to guide them was these few words:

"Therefore one of the soldiers who guarded the tomb came, and said in the synagogues, 'Know that Christ is risen!' The Jews said, 'How?' And he said: 'First there was an earthquake; then an angel of the Lord bearing lightning came down from heaven and rolled away the stone from the sepulchre, and sat upon it. And, through fear of this all we soldiers became as dead men, and could neither flee nor speak.'"

The Resurrection.
The earliest resurrection preserved among the world's art treasures is a panel by Giotto, which shows a risid figure of the Christ bearing the banner described, and posed as if about to float upward from the edge of a conical tomb, before which are seen the figures of two prone soldiers.
Giotto, the painter of this earliest resurrection scene, was a poor shepherd lad from near Florence. A noted artist once came upon him by accident, just as the boy, with a pointed pebble, was drawing one of his sheep upon a smooth rock. So remarkable

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"THE RESURRECTION"—SODOMA.



"THE ASCENSION"—MANTEGNA.



"NOLI ME TANGERE"—TITIAN.

was the sketch that the painter took back with him to Florence, where he became greater than his master. He became also the intimate friend of the poets Dante and Petrarch, and after decorating St. Peter's Church in Rome, he had honors showered upon him by the popes. He was noted also as a wit, as we know from Boccaccio, and it was he who, when once tripped up and thrown by some pigs, smilingly remarked: "Are they not right, when I have earned in my day thousands of crowns with their bristles, and yet have never given them so much as a bowl of soup?"

The Maries are represented at the tomb as talking to the angel, while the Christ is suspended above them in the picture painted, somewhat over a century later, by Fra Angelico, the next master to attempt this theme. This artist, who might have earned wealth and ease with his brush, preferred to become a monk. After he had become famed as a painter Pope Nicholas V. offered to make him archbishop of Florence, but he declined because feeling himself incapable of ruling men.



"SUPPER AT EMMAUS"—TITIAN.

Two Noted Models.
Another of the great pictures of the resurrection—one adorning the Vatican—shows an altar-shaped tomb surrounded by four soldiers. The slab covering the tomb has been moved out of place, and above rises the Christ between two adoring angels. He bears the resurrection flag in His left hand, while the right is raised in benediction. Of the soldiers represented at the base of the tomb three sit with eyes closed, while the fourth stands guard and raises his hand in amazement at what he beholds. This amazed soldier is said to have the features of the great painter Perugino, while the model for the sleeping soldier on the left of the picture is alleged to have been Raphael, then one of Perugino's pupils.
Some say that Raphael worked on this picture, and others now go so far as to claim that he painted it entirely. Perugino, to whom it has generally been credited, was another poor lad who went to Florence to find skill and fame. He became a talented portrait painter, and throughout his great decorative works are distributed wonderful likenesses of his contemporaries.
During his time, at about the period of the discovery of America, there seems to have been painted another striking picture of the resurrection—one now in the National Gallery, London. In the center of this canvas rises a sharp pinnacle of rock against which stands the risen Christ upon a marble sarcophagus. He is partly clad in a red mantle and carries the usual resurrection flag. Below, upon a ledge of rock, are five soldiers, four lying unconscious and the fifth apparently keeping watch.
One of the Mysteries.
Although there is some mystery as to Sodoma and Titian also attempted

the resurrection with varying success.

Titian represents the risen Christ as soaring high in midair. Sodoma depicts Him in the act of stepping out of a very conventional sarcophagus. The left foot is still in the tomb, and the right, which has just been withdrawn, rests upon the ground. Close below, upon a terrace, are sleeping soldiers, while an angel leans upon the end of the tomb, and in the background the cloaked figures of the three Maries are seen approaching. Tintoretto represents Jesus as bursting out of the rock of the sepulchre with such force that the rest stones threaten to crush the guarding angels themselves. Rembrandt attempted the same theme. He represented the angel in the act of removing the slab covering the sepulchre from which the Christ is awakening. In the foreground the shadowy forms of soldiers flee in terror and disorder, and one of them is overturned, head first, by the lifting of the slab. These representations, more hastily described, are not among the masterpieces of their painters, nor are they surrounded by incidents of particular interest.

The Maries at the Tomb.
One of the most beautiful of the great modern paintings dedicated to the first Easter morning is that of Hofmann, representing the three Maries halted just inside the deeply chiseled doorway of a great tomb, far within which is seen the Angel of the Resurrection in a burst of light. Two of the women have dropped to the knees, one bears the bowl in which they had brought spices.

Bouguereau, the modern French historical and portrait painter has also used the same theme. He represents the three Maries gathered at the door of the tomb where they find the huge stone rolled away and the interior of the sepulchre glowing with heavenly light. In another painting, "Easter Morn," Bouguereau paints the tomb far in the background, as a rocky cave, at the mouth of which sits the angel. In the foreground are two of the holy women, amazed at the white-haired figure of the risen Christ standing before them, banner in hand.

"Noli Me Tangere."
The next happening of the first Easter day to have inspired many of the great painters was the scene in the garden when Mary Magdalene, after mistaking Jesus for the gardener, approached Him and received the admonition: "Touch Me not. (Noli Me Tangere.) For I am not yet ascended to My Father." This scene has been represented by several of the masters under the title "Noli Me Tangere." Perhaps the most beautiful of these is the painting of Correggio, which hangs in the Prado Gallery, Madrid. He shows the Magdalene fallen upon her knees, while she looks up with amazement at the Christ, who gazes earnestly down at her as He passes before her with hand pointing to heaven. The hand with which she has attempted to touch Him is drawn back in this view, but

in a painting of the same scene by the great Titian she is endeavoring to touch Him and He is withdrawing from her the white robes in which He is partially clad. In this picture Titian oddly enough places a hoe in the hand of the Christ, to carry out the story that Mary mistook Him for the gardener, and Lorenzo di Credi, a contemporary, also placed a hoe, although a much stouter implement, in the hand of the risen Christ. In the painting of this scene by Barocci who belonged to the next generation, the meeting seems to take place indoors and Mary has a small jar in her hand.

The Supper at Emmaus.
The resurrected Christ's appearance to the disciples on their way to Emmaus and His supper with them there are the next Easter events which have inspired great pictures.

In a painting of this supper scene by Titian the disciple on the right, with a pilgrim's hat, is a portrait of Cardinal Ximenes; the other disciple represented is Ferdinand the Catholic, while the landlord of the inn is Charles V., and the page is Philip II. Another celebrated canvas devoted to this theme is that of Rembrandt, hanging in the Louvre, Paris.

The incredulity of St. Thomas, who, until he inspected the crucifixion wounds, refused to believe that he beheld the resurrected form of his Master—the event which gave us our phrase "doubting Thomas"—has been represented in numerous great paintings, notably that of Rubens, now in the Antwerp Museum. A great canvas depicting a scene directly following this is one of Raphael, showing the risen Christ in the act of sending His eleven apostles out into the world to preach the gospel and heal the sick.

The Ascension.
The ascension of Jesus was another theme which painters long hesitated to attempt, and which Giotto, the one-time shepherd boy mentioned above, was one of the first to paint. In the earliest representations Jesus is shown grasping the hand of God extended to Him through the clouds. Correggio painted a wonderful conception of this scene, but one whose seriousness is thought by some critics to be marred by the too mischievous antics of the little angels who rejoice at the great event taking place. Another remarkable ascension is that of the aforementioned Andrea Mantegna. It hangs in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, and represents the Christ in the conventional attitude of giving the benediction and bearing the resurrection flag. He floats upward upon a little platform of cloud, from which rises a nebulous background, through which peep a dozen little cherubs. Correggio represented the ascending Christ as encircled in a wreath of cherub heads. Rembrandt painted a group of little angels clinging to the cloud on which the Christ was ascending to Heaven.
Canon Farrar ranked the ascension among the subjects which it would have been much wiser to leave unpainted, or, at any rate, to paint only in a purely symbolic manner.
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